



Winter Olympics, Aristotle and Human Excellence

By The Rev. Jarrett Kerbel (2/06/26)

Whenever there is snow on the ground, my days off are devoted to Nordic skiing. Winter sports are my great love; downhill, telemarking, and cross-country are at the top of my list and I am aching to try out biathlon and luge. My family knows better than to tread in the xc trails I work hard to break in our woods and meadow.

I fell in love with Nordic skiing during the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer, Norway. Watching those incredible athletes combine physical endurance, mental focus, and stunning expertise was inspiring, to say the least. In their skiing I saw the beauty of human excellence.

The Olympics - summer and winter - are full of the transcendent beauty of humans striving for excellence. True to their origin in Greece, the games are devoted to 'arete,' which is the Greek word for excellence or virtue.

Now what interests me is the dual meaning of the word 'arete.' Virtue - according to Aristotle - is a natural human capacity cultivated and honed through practice and discipline so as to reach its ultimate goal (telos) or perfect form. Virtues are strengths inherent in the human person that contain within them a trajectory toward fulfillment in beauty, grace, and spirit.

Now, if you were to observe me on Nordic skis you would see moments where the rhythm of gliding, striding, skating and polling come together into something adjacent to arete. Watch longer and you will see me fall on my face, struggle to get back on my skis, and laugh heartily at my ineptitude.

For most of us, the human condition is not one of constant excellence; indeed, if we are ever to learn anything at all, we need to develop another virtue called humility. Without humility and the capacity to endure the embarrassment, frustration, and failings which humility grants a learner, we are not able to try, to risk, to learn. The virtues all work together and support each other, by the way, and the virtues all lead us toward integrity. The vices, on the other hand, lead us to viciousness.

Let me suggest that the struggle toward virtue - toward the flourishing of implanted human capacities - is a great training ground for followers of Jesus. When we make an effort and fall short, we learn that we need grace to become graceful. While we give thanks for the wonderful array of strengths God has given us in the goodness of our humanity, we are also aware that bringing out these strengths/virtues is a journey of recovery in which we need the assistance of our loving God.

I, for one, will be glued to the Winter Olympics even though I am told there is some other sporting event this weekend. While I watch I will give thanks to God for the awesome arete of the athletes and for the inspiration they provide to strive toward whatever excellence God has implanted and will cultivate in me.